

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

NO.9 - Symbolic Interactionism

INTRODUCTION

Symbolic Interactionism attempts to explain social actions based on the meanings given by individuals to those actions. These meanings are related to the self-concept, which influences how individuals interact. For example, seeing themselves as caring, and their interactions will reflect this belief and how others respond to this belief and the subsequent behaviour.

Symbolic Interactionism as applied to the study of behaviour contains two main themes:

i) Concern to understand the actor's point of view. From the outside, an individual's behaviour may appear strange, but from the individual's point of view (ie: inside), their behaviour is "rational". Apparently abnormal behaviour may be a rational response to the situation in which the individual finds themselves. For example, hunger strikes in prison for better conditions are attempts by the striker to maintain control in an environment where they have little control despite the damage to the self ¹.

ii) Symbolic Interactionism concentrates upon process (ie: the changing of behaviour and interactions) rather than structures (eg: fixed roles). For example, Symbolic Interactionists are more interested in how an individual's behaviour becomes labelled as deviant (process) rather than the underlying causes of deviancy. The experience of being labelled is a social process.

G. H. MEAD

Mead's ideas have been applied in sociology in different ways, and in psychology to understand the development of the self in early childhood.

For him, thought, experience and behaviour are all

¹ Goffman, E (1968) Asylums, Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin.

social processes, and products of such processes. Their origins are outside the individual, and in the meanings of society. Such meanings are based in symbols, which are predominately seen in language. For example, the word "food" is a symbol for things to eat as well as social processes related to what, where, when, and how to eat.

Symbols provide the means whereby humans can interact meaningfully with their natural and social environment. They are human-made and refer not to the intrinsic nature of objects and events but to the ways in which people perceive them ².

Thus society is the product of the symbols and their interaction (symbolic interactionism). This process is imposing meaning on the world.

Symbols are powerful because they are shared by members of society. Coming to share symbols occurs as the child learns "role-taking" (one person imagines themselves in the place of the other whom they are interacting with). Role-taking in social interaction requires the interpretation of others' behaviour.

Social institutions, like the family, have particular social roles attached to them (with particular expectations about behaviour), but individuals are not completely determined by these roles. There is flexibility within the roles for individual choice. For example, there is flexibility for behaviour within roles, as well as alternatives to certain roles (as in sub-cultures). More accurately, for Mead, individuals actively create the social environment and are shaped by it.

MEAD AND THE SELF

The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in a given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process...The self.. is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience ³.

² op cit Haralambos, M & Holborn, M p891.

³ Mead, G.H (1934) *Mind, Self and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mead believed that the self is not a structure, but a process (not organised but reflexive), which acts and responds to itself. Thus it is possible that there are many selves, some more important than others. The person is not just a mere responder to internal/external influences, but acts towards their world, interprets what happens, and organises actions on the basis of it. Knowledge of the self and others develops simultaneously, both dependent on social interaction.

The direction of development for Mead is from social to individual, through language. Crucial to this process is interaction with others, which help the child take on the perspectives of others. This, for Mead, is the process of the development of the self. This takes three stages:

i) "Preparatory stage" - initially the child's motivation revolves around basic biological drives, but soon they learn to respond to others (eg: crying brings attention).

ii) "Play stage" - the child learns to try out other perspectives by the use of role-playing.

iii) "Game stage" - children are now able to organise multiple simultaneous roles in relation to their self. This ability when finalised becomes the "generalised other" (the combined attitudes of a whole social group).

Thus thought can be seen as a dialogue between the spontaneous "I" and the "me" (based on the "generalised other"). This process though is dynamic, and continues in different contexts.

HERBERT BLUMER

Blumer ⁴ developed the ideas of Mead about symbolic interactionism, and highlighted three key ideas:

i) Symbolic Interactionism rejects the determinism of behaviour (either biological or social) because individuals act on the basis of meanings rather than simply responding to stimuli.

ii) Meanings arise from the process of interaction, and are not fixed at the onset of the interaction.

⁴ Blumer, H (1969) Symbolic Interactionism, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

iii) Meanings are a product of the interpretation of others' behaviour and the modification of the own behaviour in the interaction. However, others' behaviour is partly predictable by social guidelines which give room for manoeuvre. At the same time, apparently repetitive behaviour is still the product of the process of interpretation and interaction.

PROBLEMS WITH SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

1. Symbolic Interactionism tends to focus upon the interaction and ignore the historical context or wider social framework of the interaction ⁵.
2. Symbolic Interactionism can overemphasise flexibility and freedom in interactions, and downplay the constraints on action. These constraints include social norms ⁶. Such emphasise on freedom and choice is a product of American society, where the theories originated ⁷.
3. Symbolic Interactionism does not explain the origin of meanings that are attached to social interactions. For example, research with teachers has found shared concepts of the "ideal pupil" ⁸. Such consensus would suggest a wider social origin than the particular interactions involved between teacher and pupils.
4. Symbolic Interactionism fails to explain why the same behaviour is consistently labelled in different ways in different situations. For example, a fight between two young men can be "youthful high spirits" in one situation, but "delinquency" in others (depending on social class, say).

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